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The Spirituality of the Earth:

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Ideas are most powerful for us because they determine what we will allow ourselves to be and to experience.

Even though Descartes' cleavage of all of Reality into just two substances, Mind and Matter, (God and human beings alone had Mind, the Earth and all her inhabitants was matter), has been criticized by followers of the deep ecology movement, the pernicious influence of these ideas lives on in the way we view the Earth.

For modern science, Earth is a bundle of mechanisms. For modern philosophy, she is ideas, like "interconnected" or "ecosystem." But Lovelock has proposed that she is a living being. And many native peoples are far ahead of us in ways to relate to the planet. For them, she is a conscious, spiritual being as well, and every being on her is conscious and spiritual. This is a far cry from the view of the Earth Descartes has bequeathed to us.

To living, conscious, spiritual beings, we can relate quite differently, than by analysis and dissection. We do not dissect our pets. With living, conscious, spiritual beings, we can communicate directly, spirit to spirit. It is only because the metaphysics of Descartes still influence our behaviour that we have not done so. But a whole new (but ancient) way of relating to the planet, which is pure magic, awaits us.

I want to suggest to you, from the perspective of a wilderness life, that the planet is indeed a living, conscious and spiritual being, and that this makes possible the most wonderful ways of relating to her. In these pages I want to do a little Metaphysics, re- write some fundamental premises of the secular world and modern science, and tell you about some of my ways of being in relationship to the Earth.

These are things which followers of deep ecology, advanced as is their thinking about the Earth, have not fully described.

I have lived a wilderness life off and on for the past twelve years. Living close to the Earth, – not just for a burst of snow on a skiing week-end (which may remind you of how much you love such things) – but for the long term, gives you all her moods, and more. For the full rich Earth, – Spring in a blaze of fresh colour and luminous full moons, twilit summer evenings all purple with fireflies flickering out, golden au-tumn, and the great cold blast of winter (we get six feet of snow) – brings alive the child in us, the child most of us left behind in

our haste to grow up. That child is a nature-mystic, immersed in experiences of the Earth that are, as Whitman put it, “more beautiful than words can tell.” At this point in our evolutionary history, at the dawning of a new Ecological Age, the children, and the animals and plants, are our true teachers here. As one with the soul of a child, then, let me tell what I have learned.

Earth, who is much more than a bundle of mechanisms, is waiting for us to truly see her, to take up relationship with her, and then she will resurrect the human who is today burnt out by a tawdry consumerism and the fast pace of an artificial world. For the Earth is not a clutter of objects, but a subject in her own right, a living, conscious, spiritual being with whom we can be in an I-thou relationship.

These ideas are not new, but people do not yet know what they mean. According to modern science, (in whose house I long sojourned) only the human has consciousness. The universe is material, and consciousness has emerged in the human alone, when matter “reaches a certain stage of complexity.”

This is scientific doctrine, “we are the lords of creation,” embedded in our systems of knowledge.

I propose an ultimate paradigm shift. Consciousness is first in the universe (as religious traditions have always maintained) and secondarily forms matter. I propose a principle of continuity: If consciousness were not in the atom and the Earth, it would not be in the animals, and it would not be in us. We are part of the Earth and the Earth is part of us. Every being in the universe has an inner side, even a potato has an inner, and that inner side is consciousness. It is not our consciousness, not human consciousness, but it is consciousness nevertheless. What wilderness life teaches you, what day to day hanging out with the Earth teaches you, is that you can commune and communicate with the inner life of the Earth, the consciousness of the Earth. That is to say, revising Cartesian premises: No Matter Without Mind.

I took up wilderness life because I wanted to live with God in a simple life of prayer, writing and practical tasks close to the Earth. She has brought me to health, wholeness, and the beginning of an understanding of her ways. In a wilderness life you have to meet the Earth’s necessities, and then she will meet yours. You have to toe her bottom line, and then she will sustain you, as people in all parts of the planet, including corporations, are beginning to learn. And when you take up wilderness life as a spiritual discipline, out of a basis in prayer or meditation, a most amazing thing happens: You think less, you talk less, you settle into that profound living silence which the Christian mystic, St. John of the Cross, called “the voice of God,” your mind settles into a deep awakening life of soul, you begin to actually taste food and see the objects with which you live – cups and plates – and the animals and plants.

But most of all, in solitude, without names, you find yourself attuning to the

consciousness of a chickadee or a blue- jay, a rabbit, a mouse, a housefly.

In short, the seldom used, repressed, shut down (since childhood) inner senses open, and you can communicate with the inner of all things. (Some of the best work on these inner, spiritual senses has been done by Rudolph Steiner.) Every being on the planet, and the planet herself, is built like a human being. Seen from the outside, there is hair and skin, wrinkles and warts, but within all this, inside of all this, an interior life of thought, feeling, emotion, is taking place. Trees are like that. On the outside is bark and knots, in the inside is not just sap flowing and cells growing, but an interior life, the consciousness of the tree. As with plants, so with animals. What mechanisms, however deep in a cell it may be, is always “outsides”. Science begins in the spectator standpoint and never overcomes it – it sees only the thin skin over a spiritual inner. This “skin” is, in fact, elaborated by that inner, formed by consciousness.

So you realize, one day, that you are picking up the thoughts of the chickens as they discover the compost pile – no one knows the magic of a compost pile better than chickens. Or you discover, as you tuck them in for the night and sing them a song or two, that they are beaming interest and gratitude at you. And then, they are so fascinated by your life that they keep peering in the screen door to see what you are doing in the house. Communication is a two-way street.

Or you attune to the ducks, suddenly discovering that there is water flowing out of a hose. You pick up, in your inner life, the elation. No one knows the joy of taking a bath more than a duck.

Even more than the animals, I love the trees. The Native North Americans’ ability to talk to trees is legendary. Walk in a grove of trees, feel the soul-imagery change, put your hand to a tree, connect with its energy. Trees are fond of us, our guardians here despite all we have done to them. If you attune yourself to a tree, you can feel the love flow between you. Ask it about itself, the Earth, and it will answer you in deep imagery of soul welling up, or sometimes in words in the back of your mind, for we are all spiritual beings and words are simply our translation of those vibrations. We have all forgotten this in the modern world, where we still think we are “minds in bodies.” Catholic tradition supplies the best description of ourselves: We are body, soul and spirit, and so is the Earth.

The entire planet is animate, waiting to communicate with us, if we will realize its true nature. We have to ask the forest what trees we should be taking, we have to ask the plants which ones to use for medicine, we have to take up a genuine I-Thou relationship with the planet. And there is an even greater magic. Among us, through all beings, below their personal energies, flow the uncreated energies, the consciousness of God. When you attune deeply to the Earth, you begin to enter into the fathomless depths of the Divine which is in the Earth.

Modern science knows nothing of all this. Scalpels and electroencephalograms have never revealed inner life, but show us things merely from their outside material dimension. Going down and down in reductive explanation is like peeling the layers off an onion, you get to the bottom, the last layer goes and there is nothing left.

For indeed, what is science? Despite its great success in predicting and controlling the planet, and despite Stephen Hawking, science is really a religion, a set of rules, theories, laws, which determine the nature of acceptable reality. It is based on far-reaching assumptions which may have very little to do with the real nature of the universe. What lies beyond the “religious” structure is rejected, but it is not even seen.

The Earth is waiting to teach each of us all about depth, connection and otherness, if we can learn to relate to her as a conscious, spiritual and divine being, and not as “mere matter.”

And Spirit, grown thin and bare in the last 300 years waiting, in the consciousness of still mountains, of flowing streams, to reveal Itself anew, not through ideas, not in doctrines and dogmas, but through feeling, through touch, through deep inner experience. All knowledge of Spirit is experiential, and the Earth is full of Spirit. God is not up in the sky, we have been gazing heavenwards for so long we have not learned to live here. God is in the ground at our feet, if we have the sense to perceive It there.

My background in science, philosophy and the spiritual traditions tempts me to deeper speculations. What is this matter, which Descartes was so eager to separate from Mind, of which the Earth is supposed to be utterly devoid? Matter is simply the highly condensed, stepped down into the physical plane, consciousness of Spirit. What else is there in this universe? What came “before” the Big Bang? Only the consciousness of Spirit, exploding into form in a blaze of light. All of physical Reality comes to be out of the consciousness of God. All matter is mind.

The Western world is ready for metaphysics again.

And the Earth is ready to reveal to us all the secrets of a conscious being, of a multitude of conscious beings. The animals and plants have received much bad press from scientific and religious traditions. We reason and think, the animals function by instinct; we have emotions, the animals are cleverly-wired machines.

In truth, the plants and animals of the planet are not inferior, more primitive life forms than ourselves. They are older than we are. They arrived here first. They have been around longer. They are our teachers here. Indeed, how could we know anything about this planet? If evolution is plotted on the course of a single day, the human species arrived at 11 seconds to midnight, and we have been trying to separate ourselves from Earth ever since. That may have been

necessary in order to establish human identity. Now it is time to re-connect, in the right way. Far better for us if, rather than teach monkeys to type a few words of ours on the typewriter, we learn how to communicate with them, by adapting ourselves to their forms. Findhorn meditators tell us that plants and trees, simply by being attuned to Infinite Consciousness all day, have Christ-consciousness. Perhaps that is what Heidegger meant by “the light of Being.” Most of us have not achieved it.

The animals still know how to experience the Beauty of a planet to which we are blind, deaf and dumb, but they will teach us how.

The Earth is a living, conscious spiritual being. With such a being one can communicate spirit to spirit, soul to soul. As has been said, put your hand to a tree and ask it about itself, and it will answer you in images floating up from the depths.

That is how animals, too, communicate with us, in images passed from soul to soul, much deeper, more accurate and more vivid than any amount of human vocabulary taught to monkeys.

This is possible because before all language is the image. When I am in Toronto, lying on my couch, my puss of 19 years lies on my stomach and we commune together about all that we most love about Cape Breton. Then puss shows me her world as she sees it – grass blades, wet wooden steps, the hidden tunnels through raspberry canes.

Try experiencing the woods as the deer experiences it, or the pond through the singing of the frogs on a summer’s night. That is what it is to be a fully alive human being. We have not yet even begun to be! Tom Brown captures some of this magic in his two books *The Tracker*, and *The Search*. Earth, and all the beings of Earth, are waiting to introduce to us a major enrichment of our own consciousness, as we attune ourselves to theirs, as we become willing to meet the Earth on her own terms. These last 300 years have been the most impoverished era of the human spirit. Let our dark night of spirit come to an end. The Earth has an anima, and is besouled, just as Plato thought. It awaits us.

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